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ABSTRACT

The benefits of including a neutral category in research on children's sex stereotypes were explored in this research on 236 third, fifth and eighth graders' stereotypes of peers and adults. Stories describing 26 stereotyped traits were given to students to judge as more characteristic of males than females, more characteristic of females than males, or equally characteristic of both sexes. The result showed that the "same" or neutral category was useful in clarifying the substance of the stereotypes; many adjectives previously designated as descriptors of one sex were more frequently described as the "same" for both sexes. In addition, the greater stereotyping by male responders, the higher degree of stereotyping of peer over adult stimulus objects, and the curvilinear relationship of grade of respondent and stereotyping (fifth graders gave more stereotyped responses) could be explained through reference to the use of the neutral category. Results appeared to support a cognitive developmental point of view and to question the ideas of linear age increases in stereotyping behavior as formulated by social learning theorists. (Author/MP)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF A "NEUTRAL" CATEGORY IN RESEARCH ON SEX STEREOTYPES

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Abstract

The benefits of including a neutral category in research on children's sex stereotypes is explored in this research on 236 third, fifth and eighth graders' stereotypes of peers and adults. Stories describing 26 stereotyped traits were given to students to judge as more characteristic of males than females, of females than males, or equally characteristic of both sexes. The results showed first that the "same" or neutral category was useful in clarifying the substance of the stereotypes; many adjectives previously designated as descriptors of one sex were more frequently described as the "same" for both sexes. In addition, the greater stereotyping by male respondents, the higher degree of stereotyping of peer over adult stimulus objects, and the curvilinear relationship of grade of respondent and stereotyping (fifth graders gave more stereotyped responses) could be explained through reference to the use of the neutral category. Competing explanations from social learning and cognitive developmental theory could be evaluated.

The Importance of a Neutral Category in Research on Sex Stereotypes

Most research on sex stereotypes with adult subjects employs a methodology which allows a subject to indicate that s/he believes that a particular personality characteristic or occupational preference is equally applicable to both sexes as well as that it is more applicable to one of the sexes than to the other. Often the "equally applicable" or "neutral" category is explicit in the measuring instrument. For example, McKee and Sherriffs (1957) asked college students which of the sexes they believed to be superior to the other. The response alternatives included one which states that the sexes were equal to each other. However, the neutral category option can be implicit, as for example, in the procedure used by Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman and Broverman (1968). In their work subjects are asked to rate a "typical male" and a "typical female" on a series of bipolar adjective scales. Subjects can indicate that they believe the sexes do not differ on a particular trait by rating the "typical male" and the "typical female" at identical points on the scale.

On the other hand, sex stereotype studies with children as subjects have generally used a forced-choice technique, in which the respondent must indicate whether s/he believes a particular trait or occupational preference is more characteristic of males or of females. The neutral option, i.e., that both sexes are the same, is not permitted (Kagan, 1956; Williams, Bennett & Best, 1975; Best, Williams, Cloud, Davis, Robertson, Edwards, Giles & Fowles, 1977). This paper argues that the inclusion of a neutral category in such research would allow a more complete understanding of children's sex stereotypes.

Much of the sex stereotype research with children examines developmental issues relating to sex and age differences by measuring the degree to which the beliefs of individuals in various sex/age groups conform to the prevailing cultural stereotypes. Since researchers presumably know the societal stereotypes and are only interested in the extent to which respondents concur, a technique which "forces" respondents to choose between just two alternatives (i.e., "male" or "female") can be acceptable. However, the addition of a third, neutral, category enables researchers to expand their analyses. Instead of being able to analyze just the degree to which individuals' beliefs do or do not correspond to societal stereotypes (i.e., the "correct" or "noncorrect" responses) they can split the "noncorrect" responses into two categories for separate analyses: (1) neutral responses reflecting a belief that the sexes do not differ with respect to a particular trait or behavior, and (2) responses reflecting a belief that the nontraditional sex is more likely to exhibit a particular trait or behavior.

The power of this technique is illustrated by the following hypothetical example. Suppose you have two groups of respondents in a study, Groups A and B. For a question about physical strength assume that 30% of Group A believed males were stronger than females (i.e., the "correct" response), 40% believed the sexes were equally strong, and 30% believed females were stronger than males. Then suppose that 30% of Group B believed that males were stronger than females, 60% believed the sexes were equally strong, and 10% believed females were stronger than males. An analysis of only the "correct" responses leads to a conclusion that the two groups of subjects hold similar sex stereotypes about strength. However, if one also

analyzes the "neutral" responses and "incorrect-sex" responses, it is clear that there is a substantial difference between the groups. In the first group, there is little consensus of beliefs. In fact, precisely the same proportion of individuals refute the prevailing sex stereotype as accept it. In the second group there is substantial consensus; most respondents hold egalitarian beliefs. Thus, having a neutral category helps to clarify the similarities and differences between the groups, which should, in turn, help identify the underlying developmental processes.

Methodology

Subjects

Two hundred thirty-six children from the third, fifth, and eighth grades of a small suburban Connecticut town participated in the study. Seventy-six (32 males, 44 females) were third graders; 66 (27 males, 39 females) were fifth graders; and 94 (40 males, 54 females) were eighth graders. About 40% of the fathers worked in blue-collar jobs and about a third of the fathers were professionals or business executives. Forty percent of the mothers were employed, most in clerical, blue collar or service occupations. Virtually all the children were white.

Sex Stereotype Measure

Sex stereotypes were measured by a questionnaire that tapped beliefs about the applicability of 26 traits to males and females. The traits were selected following a review of earlier sex stereotype literature

and two pilot studies by the present authors. Each trait on the questionnaire had been found to be sex-stereotyped in at least two previous studies, with a median of 4.5 studies. Thirteen of the traits had previously been found to be more characteristic of women than men, and thirteen had been found to be more characteristic of men than women.

The format for presenting the traits was similar to that used by Williams and his colleagues (Williams et al., 1975). Each trait was elaborated by a single sentence story that gave a concrete example of a behavior associated with that characteristic. Following each story the subject was asked whether s/he believed the trait was more characteristic of males than females or more characteristic of females than males, or equally characteristic of both. The respondent then circled one of these three alternatives on his/her questionnaire.

The following are two representative items:

Some people are strong [sic]. They can lift heavy things easily. Who is like that? Are girls stronger, are boys stronger or are they the same?

Girls Boys Same

Some people are understanding. They listen to you when you have a problem. Who is like that? Are girls more understanding, are boys more understanding, or are they the same?

Girls Boys Same

Two versions of the questionnaire were completed by each respondent. One version instructed respondents to compare girls and boys their own age on each of the 26 traits, as shown in the examples above. The other version instructed respondents to answer by comparing adult men and

women. These two versions were used in order to replicate an earlier study by one of the present authors (Gold & St. Ange, 1974), which had found differences between children's stereotypes of their peers and of adults. Since this earlier study had used a forced-choice procedure, we felt a non-forced choice measure might clarify the nature of these differences. The order of presentation of these two versions was counterbalanced.

Procedure

The stereotype measure was given as a paper and pencil survey to all subjects. The experimenter read each question aloud to the third graders. For the fifth graders only one version (26 items) was read aloud, while they worked at their own pace for the other items. The eighth graders were not read any of the items, although the experimenter did go over the instructions and a sample question with them before they began.

Third and fifth graders were tested in groups of 5-15 students outside their classroom. Eighth graders completed the questionnaire all together in their own classroom.

Results and Discussion

Since the results for the feminine-stereotyped items and the masculine-stereotyped items did not differ with regard to the use of a neutral category, they are combined for the present analyses.

Each subject's responses were summed to create six scores, three for the items relating to the stereotypes of the child's peers and three for the items relating to his/her stereotypes of adults. The scores were as follows: (1) the number of times the "correct" alternative was chosen, or the number of times the child agreed with the stereotypes found in previous research; (2) the number of times the "same" category was chosen; and (3) the number of times the "incorrect sex" category was chosen. Separate analyses of variance were carried out for each of these three types of scores. A 3 x 2 x 2 repeated measures design was used, with grade and sex of respondent as between subject factors and stimulus object (peer or adult) as the within-subject factor.

The means for the number of "correct" responses, the traditional measure of degree of stereotyping, are shown in Table 1. The analysis of

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

variance yielded three significant effects. Male subjects gave significantly more stereotyped responses than did female subjects ($F=7.97$, $df=1,230$, $p<.01$). More stereotyped responses were given when the stimulus objects were the subjects' peers than when they were adults ($F=5.45$, $df=1,230$, $p<.05$). And, finally, there was a curvilinear relationship between grade and stereotyping, with fifth graders giving more stereotyped answers than either third or eighth graders ($F=8.70$, $df=2,230$, $p<.01$).

With these three effects in mind, let us now examine the results of the other two analyses of variance--for the "same" and for the "incorrect sex" responses--in order to show how the inclusion of a neutral category can aid interpretation. The means for these two measures are shown in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The greater stereotyping by the male respondents can be seen as primarily due to the fact that males gave fewer "same" responses than did females ($F=13.14$, $df=1,230$, $p<.01$) and secondarily, due to the fact that males gave a significantly greater number of "incorrect sex" responses than did females ($F=10.15$, $df=1,230$ $p<.01$), especially in the third grade ($F_{sex \times grade}=4.47$, $df=2,230$, $p<.025$). In other words, males chose both more "correct" alternatives and more "incorrect" ones. These results would seem to point to two processes affecting sex differences in stereotyping. First, the more frequent level of "same" responses among girls suggests that they have more egalitarian beliefs than the boys. This interpretation fits with many other studies showing that preadolescent girls have less pressure to conform to traditional sex stereotypes than do preadolescent boys (Hartley, 1959). It follows, then, that girls would believe that behavioral prescriptions are less rigid. Second, the greater number of "incorrect sex" responses by the third grade boys, in particular, may be due to a tendency for boys to be slower to accept socially undesirable traits as descriptors of their own sex. When we examined the specific adjectives on which a large number of "incorrect sex" responses occurred, socially undesirable adjectives predominated. The boys not only rejected the undesirable traits for themselves, but also assigned them to girls.

As noted earlier the analyses of the "correct" responses showed that peers were thought of in more stereotyped terms than were adults. This finding replicates earlier data from Gold & St. Ange (1974). These authors had speculated that the difference they observed might be due to children's lesser familiarity with adults than with peers, which would consequently

cause children to make more "mistakes." The results on Table 2 indicate that this explanation is not accurate. The difference between stimulus objects is entirely due to a higher number of "same" responses for adult stereotypes than for peer stereotypes ($F=16.33$, $df=1,230$, $p<.01$), not to a difference in "incorrect sex" responses ($F=1.86$, $df=1,230$, $p<.20$) as would be expected. Children did not make "mistakes", but rather, they expressed beliefs that there are more clear differences between girls and boys their own age than between adult men and women.

Such results suggest two new explanations. First, the responses could reflect empirically valid perceptions by the respondents; male and female adults may, in fact, be more alike (i.e., "same") for the traits on the questionnaire than are male and female children. This explanation, however, is not supported by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) in their review of prior research. An examination of their tables reveals that studies of sex differences between male and female children in the behaviors described on our sex-stereotype questionnaire have found the same magnitude of difference between the sexes as did those studies of sex differences between adults.

A second explanation for the difference between the stereotypes for the two stimulus objects may be related to the different frames of reference used by the children in making their judgments. When children judge their peers, a major difference among individuals is gender. When they judge adults, gender, age, and the adult's role in relation to the child are relevant. It is very likely that age and role may be the more salient frames of reference (Emmerich, 1959). When children think about adults, they may think of them primarily as "older people" or parents, rather than as men

and women. The data provide some support for this interpretation. The traits for which stereotypes about adults and peers differed were primarily those relating to nurturance, an important quality of parenting. Traits such as "affectionate," "likes babies and children" and "understanding" were believed to characterize adult men and women equally, but were thought of as more characteristic of female children than of male children.

The third effect from the analysis of "correct" stereotypes was related to age (grade) of respondent, an area to which considerable attention has been given in the literature. Studies by Williams (Williams et al, 1975; Best, et al., 1977) using a forced-choice format have found a linear increase in degree of stereotyping as a function of age. These authors argue, from a social learning point of view, that their findings reflect the increase in awareness of stereotypes that results from knowledge gained as one grows older. On the other hand, cognitive developmentalists, such as Kohlberg and Ullian (1974), have stressed that beliefs about masculinity and femininity are not unitary concepts acquired in a linear fashion, but rather are concepts that show a pattern of alternating flexibility and rigidity that is related to the development of concrete and formal operations. In her interviews with children Ullian found that eight-year-olds (about third grade), while concrete in their thinking, held fairly egalitarian belief systems with regard to sex roles; that ten-year-olds (about fifth grade) held fairly rigid stereotypes; and that 12 to 14-year-olds (seventh-ninth grades), having acquired formal operations, became fairly egalitarian again. Our data on "correct" responses, showing a curvilinear relationship with the highest degree of stereotyped beliefs at fifth grade, would seem to support this cognitive developmental point of view.

An examination of the results of the "same" and "incorrect sex" responses on Table 2 reveals some support for this interpretation. The curvilinear relationship seems to be primarily a function of differences in the number of "same" responses that are given at each age level, particularly for the female subjects. Although there is no statistically significant grade effect for the "same" measure, there is a significant sex of respondent x grade interaction ($F=3.30$, $df=2,230$, $p<.05$); while the male respondents show little grade difference, the third and eighth grade females were more egalitarian (i.e., chose the "same" alternative more frequently) than were the fifth grade females. This is what would be predicted from Kohlberg and Ullian's cognitive developmental model. It is a bit problematic that the pattern emerges only for the females' responses, but it may be the case that the pressure on males toward conformity to traditional sex role norms is too great to permit the flexibililty of beliefs outlined by Kohlberg and Ullian.

In order to obtain a more <u>complete</u> picture of the age differences in sex-stereotyping, it is necessary to examine the pattern of "incorrect-sex" responses as well as the pattern of "same" responses (see Table 2). Analyses of these data yielded a significant grade effect ($F=17.30$, $df=2,230$ $p<.01$); younger children were more likely to choose the "wrong sex" than were the older children. This finding, on the other hand, is compatible with Williams' social learning theory explanation, emphasizing the age-related acquisition of information.

The analysis of the age differences is perhaps the clearest illustration of the usefulness of the neutral category. Without the neutral category we would not have been able to see that both social learning theory and cognitive developmental theory may contribute to the understanding of developmental changes in sex stereotypes. Separating the two types of "noncorrect" responses enabled us to separate two processes that, when combined, result in the one effect which is seen when using more conventional stereotype measures.

Table 1

Mean Number of "Correct " Responses

	Male Respondents (N=99)			Female Respondents (N=137)		
Grade	N	Peer Stereotype	Adult Stereotype	N	Peer Stereotype	Adult Stereotype
Third	32	13.00 (5.58)[1]	12.34 (4.56)	44	10.52 (4.95)	9.02 (4.60)
Fifth	27	14.37 (4.23)	13.44 (4.26)	39	14.92 (3.77)	12.95 (4.50)
Eighth	40	14.45 (5.34)	13.55 (4.55)	54	12.44 (4.21)	12.09 (4.21)

[1]Standard deviation in parenthesis

Table 2

Mean Number of "Same" Responses and "Incorrect-Sex" Responses

"Same" Responses

	Male Respondents			Female Respondents		
Grade	N	Peer Stereotype	Adult Stereotype	N	Peer Stereotype	Adult Stereotype
Third	32	9.46 (7.36)[1]	10.03 (6.07)	44	13.43 (6.33)	15.39 (5.25)
Fifth	27	9.80 (5.00)	10.90 (4.90)	39	9.97 (3.92)	12.13 (4.72)
Eighth	40	10.53 (6.02)	11.60 (5.01)	54	12.48 (4.73)	12.96 (4.63)

"Incorrect Sex" Responses

Third	32	3.53 (3.41)	3.62 (3.44)	44	2.05 (2.97)	1.59 (1.74)
Fifth	27	1.82 (2.08)	1.63 (2.48)	39	1.10 (1.23)	.92 (1.04)
Eighth	40	1.03 (1.17)	.85 (1.25)	54	1.07 (1.74)	.94 (1.62)

[1]Standard deviation in parenthesis

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